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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 4599
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 2403
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 2268
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 2847
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 3153
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: OSCE AND UN ELECTION EXPERTS OBSERVE
SMALL IMPROVEMENTS IN ELECTION CONDUCT

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: During recent parliamentary elections, OSCE and UN election experts assessed election officials' observance of internationally-acknowledged election procedures. They also did fact-finding about the candidates, the electoral process and the implementation of the new parliamentary election law. While OSCE representatives were overall more negative in their election day observations, UN representatives acknowledged that the Turkmen government is making small steps forward on electoral reform. Both believe there is still much work to be done. Although not official observer missions, the two teams' visits gave Turkmen officials a first taste of what hosting Western observers would entail, and what such observers might expect of them.
END SUMMARY.

OBSERVERS HAD QUICK ACCREDITATION AND GOOD ACCESS

¶3. (SBU) On December 15, both OSCE and UNDP election assessment experts shared their observations of official conduct on election day here. OSCE experts said their experience on Sunday had gone relatively well, although there continue to be major obstacles to the OSCE sending an official team of election observers for future elections. OSCE/ODIHR representatives Gilles Saphy and Nikolai Vulchanov said the government accredited their team immediately upon arrival, which was a very good sign. The team was also told they could go anywhere except detention and military facilities to do their work. They were able to visit polling stations in at least three provinces.

VAGUE CAMPAIGNS AND SOME IRREGULARITIES

¶4. (SBU) The OSCE experts were also able to attend campaign events before the elections. Overall, they said the campaigns appeared to be very vague, and could identify no specific platform positions for the candidates, other than support for the president's policies. During their travels, the experts also noted that while election officials at the polling stations had a good general understanding of election procedures, their understanding was much more limited on the specifics. They also noticed that while government officials

did not escort them between polling sites, each site had representatives from the MFA, provincial government and district overseeing their interactions with local representatives. OSCE representatives also encountered strange irregularities along the way, such as the sudden appearance at closing time of six boxes filled with ballots that joined the primary one in a polling station they visited.

OBSTACLES TO FUTURE OSCE OBSERVER MISSION

15. (SBU) The OSCE representatives said there are still several key issues that stand in the way of official OSCE observer missions coming here for future elections. The revised election law, while a step in the right direction, did not include sufficient reforms to qualify for a more expanded OSCE participation. For example, there was still no specific provision for multiple political parties, although multiple parties were not expressly forbidden. The lack of separation between public unions and organizations and the central government was another problem, given associations' major role in advancing the nominations of almost all potential political candidates. When they met with Foreign Minister Meredov during their visit, he argued that at this point in time, Turkmen citizens do not need plurality, they need unity. Vulchanov said that their two meetings with Meredov made it clear to him that future cooperation between the Turkmen government and OSCE will continue to have clear and yet limited parameters.

UN EXPERTS RECOGNIZED SMALL STEPS TOWARD DEMOCRACY

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16. (SBU) The UN Election Assessment Team reported a similar experience during the elections, but generally opined that Turkmenistan is making small steps forward in the process of democratization. On the positive side, the team saw many signs that UNDP's election procedure training had paid off, and officials were managing the technical details more effectively. Although still strongly influenced by the traditions of the past, election officials told the team that this election felt different from previous elections, and that they were working hard to improve their procedures. Government officials told team members that they appreciated the electoral reform assistance they had received thus far, and wanted to continue with electoral project work. The team told Charge that the UN was currently looking for new ways to promote progress here on democratization and pluralism, and for opportunities to discuss further concrete steps.

VOTER TURNOUT FIGURES EXAGGERATED

17. (SBU) On the other hand, the team was concerned by the turnout percentage the government reported, which was above 94 percent. The team saw that on one station's voter list near the end of the day, only about 30 percent of the names had been crossed off, making them doubtful about the turnout information reported. The team also saw election workers at one station bring in an additional, full ballot box, just before the station closed. When questioned about the box, the workers indicated that these were the votes of the sick and elderly who could not make it to the polls.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: Hosting these two groups before and during the election was a big step for Turkmen officials, who had never before hosted Western or UN groups and had no idea what their own responsibilities would be, much less the election experts. It provided an impetus for election officials to do a good job and generated on-the-ground feedback about how to improve the electoral process. Such commentary from experts who actually observed the elections might carry more weight with the Turkmen than criticism from overseas observers. The presence of the experts also provided officials here with a first taste of what hosting an official election observer mission might entail, should that happen in the future. END COMMENT.

MILES